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The Aesthetics of Argument, by Martin Warner

Christopher Hamilton

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BOOK REVIEW

Warner, Martin, *The Aesthetics of Argument*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. xvii + 318, £50 (hardback)

For many philosophers, as Martin Warner points out in this thought-provoking book, the ideal of rational argument is deductive reasoning. But, clearly, most philosophical argument is not of this kind, and philosophers make great use of inductive arguments as well as of other argument forms—for example, abduction or analogy. Yet they are, in general, suspicious of forms of argument that seem to have force in other ways—through rhetoric, narrative persuasion, poetic language, imaginative appeal, and the like. It is the aim of Warner's book to make clear that such forms of argument can be part of the 'rationality of ... discourse'. In particular, he is interested in the features of rational persuasion that 'have traditionally been associated ... closely with poetics' [x]. How poetry persuades and persuades rationally is what he wants to know, although his discussion is, in fact, broader than that might suggest. Indeed, the book is fairly lengthy, and there is much that I cannot discuss here, despite its intrinsic interest.

Warner's approach is mainly through a study of cases. Starting with the parable of the Good Samaritan, he explores the way in which it invites its hearer to change his concept of (who is his) neighbour. Warner explains the need for a new concept here in terms drawn from Charles Taylor's account of transitions in reasoning. The difficulty here, however, is that Warner assimilates changes in science—for example, a shift from 'Renaissance sub-Aristotelian to Galilean theories of motion' [6]—to those in ethics—for example, from an old concept of the neighbour to a new one. But the differences between scientific and moral reasoning are surely crucial here, and are being overlooked. For example, there is clearly a first-personal element in moral reasoning that is not present in science: I can take much scientific knowledge on trust from others, but I cannot in the same way take your moral judgments about what I should do or think or feel. Consider, for example, Warner's comment that '[b]eing led to relinquish the confused assumption that love is incompatible with resentment may enable one to recognize one's love for another despite certain negative emotions' [9]. Someone *may*, indeed, come to see his or her love in that way and thus think of himself or herself as having overcome some kind of confusion. But someone else might go on thinking that his love for another is inadequate because it contains, or exists alongside, a certain resentment, and it is not clear that this must be seen as a confusion. The irony of Warner's claim is that what he seems to see as a confused form of love is one that was demanded of us by Jesus.

Still, Warner does not think that Taylor's model can do more than preliminary work. After discussing various forms of analogical reasoning, Warner goes on to discuss the way in which narrative might effect the kinds of change in outlook of the sort exemplified by exploration of the Good Samaritan. Rightly, in my view, rejecting the strong claim that literature—whatever that is, exactly [43–4]—is peculiarly apt to encourage moral development in the reader [45–6], Warner nonetheless suggests that it can develop our imaginative capacities and 'enlarge our conception of human possibilities' [46]. He appeals here to Pascal's *esprit de finesse*: we are dealing here with a

demand by a narrative, a parable, or whatever on the sensibility of the reader or hearer that, when tuned to pick up as much as possible from what is being read, or said, is affected in ways that are obscure—and yet that inevitably misses much. We need to have ears to hear, but even if we have them it is not at all clear how we are affected, if we are, or if we can ever be sure that we have not missed something crucial that was there to be heard. I suspect strongly that we are all of us much more obtuse than we suppose ourselves to be, and that this puts very strong limits on how it is that literature can enlarge our conception of human possibilities. People are, after all, notoriously bad at learning from their own direct personal experiences, let alone those of others, or those of others embedded in the kind of texts that we think of as being literary.

Warner is, I think, more sanguine than I am about such matters, even though he agrees with Pascal that ‘it takes a sense of great delicacy and precision to feel and judge correctly and accurately’ in these cases [57]. Still, he wants to secure the claim that the kind of responsiveness to texts that Pascal’s *esprit de finesse* manifests ‘points to flexible and informal but nevertheless rationally legitimate forms of persuasion’ [57].

In a discussion of Plato’s *Symposium* [ch. 3] Warner argues that Plato wishes to show us a type of argument—that concerning love, in this dialogue—that can be successful, not because it seeks convincing proofs of its claims, but because it draws out the strengths and weaknesses of different views of love as articulated by various and credible sensibilities, namely, the personalities in that dialogue, a procedure that Plato generalizes and defends, Warner argues [ch. 2], in the *Phaedrus* [90–1]. There is a lot to be said for this approach, but I think that Warner underplays the way in which love necessarily baffles us: love possesses ‘a half-domesticated life which remains still outward and alien at the moment of appropriation’ [Jones 1964: 234].

In chapter 4, Warner explores Augustine’s *Confessions* and Mill’s *Autobiography*, in each case discussing very interestingly the way in which the author’s model of a flourishing human life relates to the story that he tells of his own life. Chapter 5 deals with patterns of argument in the Fourth Gospel, while chapter 6 seeks to provide, through discussion of *Four Quartets*, an illustration of the way in which ‘a mass of sensitive responses [to a poem] are precipitated into philosophical belief’ [157, quoting Anthony Quinton].

Chapters 7 and 8 turn to the question of the emotional logic, or the logic of the imagination, of a poem, rehearsing some of the difficulties around the concepts of image and symbol and proposing a model for ‘a “logic” of imagery’ [206]. His suggestion is, roughly speaking, that we can proceed on a case-by-case basis, assessing, not the truth of an image (whatever that might be), but its appropriateness in the context of the poem as a whole, although reference to the extra-poetical world is also relevant—‘we look for verisimilitude’ [209]. Central here is the total effect of a poem [175]. No doubt, this is plausible. But it is a fairly modest claim and captures only part of what a literary critic might be doing when analysing a poem. I am more than happy to accept that there is some kind of logic of imagery in a poem, but, precisely because what Warner ends up doing here is describing (part of) the practice of the critic, it is highly unlikely that any philosopher who is sceptical of (the existence of) such logic is liable to be convinced by Warner’s claims. If their plausibility depends, as it does, on, among other things, following through any given critic’s analysis, then such a philosopher will just be likely to think, I imagine, that, well, yes, this is the kind of thing that critics do but that this hardly shows that there is genuine thought in the poem rather than the expression of thought in a given way [199] and that it is the job of philosophy

(not poetry) to assess the thought. To put the point polemically: if someone simply does not have the sensibility (Pascal's *esprit de finesse*) to get the point of speaking, in the context of a poem, of the logic of its imagery, then no insistence, however philosophically measured and clear, of what a critic is doing in following such imagery will get him or her to agree that there is such a logic. That suggests that the sensibility of someone who wishes to argue for the existence of such logic is more entangled in the discussion than one might suppose, but Warner is curiously non-committal on that, as if a kind of philosophical neutrality free of all rhetoric, poetic language, imagination, and the rest were, after all, available, despite the avowed intention to put that idea into question. At the meta-level, Warner's reflections seem to betray their content.

Moreover, the issue of poetic verisimilitude is more recalcitrant than Warner suggests. He concentrates here, as in many other places in this book, on T.S. Eliot. For sure, Eliot, as he says, is seeking in *Four Quartets* to understand the meaning of his own experiences in such a way that readers will then be able to reinspect their own private understandings and wonder if these tell the truth about the world [236]. However, there is a way in which those who feed from the arts (not just poetry) sense that there is a truth here that goes beyond anything that philosophy could offer. This is well brought out by Roger Scruton who relates a moment he experienced with Ian McFetridge when teaching him. Scruton writes [2009: 9]:

One day he came early for a tutorial, when I was listening to Schubert's *Schwanengesang*; he sat down quietly, and, when the record was over, unexpectedly remarked that there was more truth in such music than in any abstract philosophy.

As it seems to me, the truth that a poem or other work of art can tell about the world seems to leave philosophy behind and to show its inadequacy. This is no doubt connected with the typical failings of (much) philosophy: its conviction that all that is true can be stated clearly and without self-contradiction; its hostility to imagination and its literal-mindedness; its reduced conceptual repertoire; and so on. It is not clear to me that Warner sees the issue here.

The book closes with an Afterword, the most interesting part of which concerns hermeneutics and the question of truth. I would have liked to see some of these themes developed earlier and in greater depth, as they raise urgently those questions of the entanglement of a writer's sensibility that I mentioned earlier. Overall, Warner does not fully succeed in showing how to resist, when assessing arguments, 'the mutual extraneousness of reason, senses, feeling and will' [57] as Nietzsche has it, but his book, although somewhat overlaid with scholarship, suggests plenty that might help further thinking here.

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Christopher Hamilton
 King's College London